

Level One - Grades 4-6 - First Place Winner - 2022

Callum G.

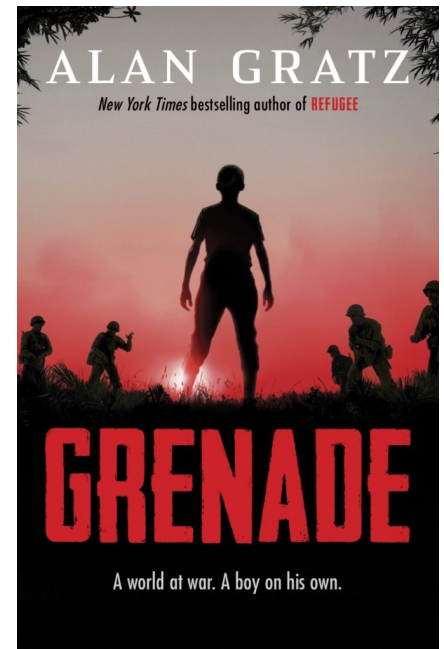
New Palestine, Indiana

Dear Alan Gratz,

I really should blame this whole thing on my great-grandfather. I mean, the reason I got interested in WWII was to know more about his past. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge and was captured. He was a POW from about Christmas to Easter in 1944 -1945. He is still alive today, at 98 years old. I would always listen to his stories and not fully understand them until one day I decided I would learn about this major conflict. From the first book I read about the subject I was fascinated. As I started to dig deeper I looked at his war stories differently, even imagining what it must have been like to live through such a significant event in history.

Due to my interest in the topic, I immediately got hooked on your writing. Your style of writing and the perspectives makes me feel like I am actually in the setting of your books. For example, in **Allies**, when Dee watches *The Achilles* go up in smoke, I swear I could feel the heat from the burning Sherman. After that I sought to quench my thirst for your books.

When I read **Grenade** though, it changed my point of view of the war in the Pacific. When I picked it up, because I had read a lot about the topic, I thought I knew what I was expecting—valiant heroes in green, rifles in hand determined to protect us from some evil monsters that needed to be stopped, all taking place somewhere foreign. But when I read **Grenade**, I realized what I'd thought was wrong. Sure it had the foreign lands and the determination, but there was something else. A boy, one whom I could connect with.



I understand why Hideki was given the grenades. I understand why he chose to do the things he did on that day. The reason is fear. The Imperial Japanese Army was afraid the Americans would win, so they gave the Blood and Iron Student Corps the grenades. Hideki chose to drop that grenade out of fear of the American. That was why Ray fired at Hideki in the first place; it was because he was afraid of this Okinawan boy. They both made bad decisions because they also each didn't understand who the other person really was. I can connect to this. Everyone can. We all make rash and consequential decisions when we are scared. I have been afraid when I was unsure about something as well. It has led to me making instantaneous decisions, more of them bad than good.

Seeing this fear from the so-called "enemy" made me realize that we are all the same, no matter race, ethnicity or even religion. Just because you are different or do something bad doesn't make you the enemy. I think Hideki realized this too, after he killed Ray. It's why he feels remorse after he uses the grenade. I thank you for writing this book, as it changed my view greatly. I hope you continue to write more books to help change the views of people like me. It will make the world a kinder and more understanding place.

Sincerely,
Callum G.

Level Two - Grades 7-8 - First Place Winner - 2022

Naomi C.
Indianapolis, Indiana

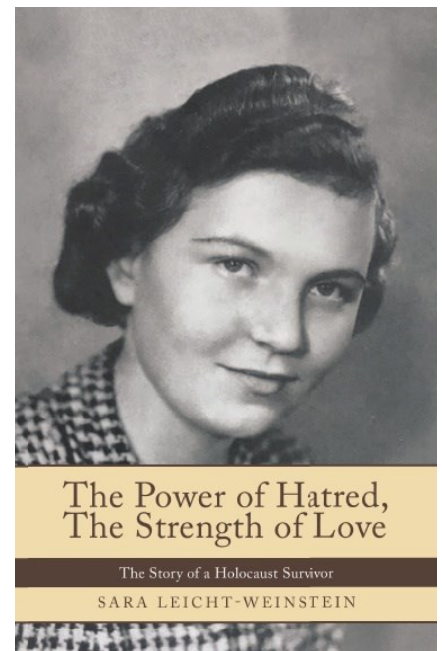
Dear Sara Leicht-Weinstein,

From the very first page of ***The Power of Hatred, The Strength of Love*** to the last, tears began to sting my face as I envisioned a girl my age stepping off a filthy cattle car into the gates of hell—Auschwitz. I began to question the world and people around me. What causes people to hate so deeply? Why do people find it so difficult to put their differences aside? Which is more powerful—love or hate?

As a 14-year-old Jewish Orthodox girl, your feelings really resonated with me. I have been bullied, made fun of, and judged because of my political opinions and devotion to Judaism. I feel like an outcast to people in my school and city as the Orthodox community is so small.

People make rude slurs and say terrible things about my modesty and the way that I talk. I am so sick of hearing, "Why is your skirt so long?" and "Why do you even pray? God is not real." I am afraid to share any opinion that I possess about the world for fear of being judged. I admit that I also am guilty of being quick to judge others and dislike them because of their opinions and beliefs. Reading your book forced me to reflect on my behaviors. We do not always need to agree with others, but it is possible to disagree peacefully. Of equal importance, I need to treat others with kindness, no matter their beliefs.

You found the ability to love even though I am positive your hatred of the Nazis was consuming and that's how you were able to survive and thrive, despite the inconceivable horrors that you witnessed as a child. You were miraculously spared death from the Nazi-built gas chambers by being pulled out as the doors



were closing behind you. You had every right to live your life in bitterness and hatred but you chose a different path—one of love, acceptance and joy.

You devoted your life to help others in need by becoming a neonatal nurse, dedicating yourself to saving as many tiny lives as you could. Having lost your parents at such a young age, you made it your life's mission to be a loving devoted mother and grandmother. You escaped the traumas of your past through love and acceptance. *That* is true power.

The Nazis were animalistic villains, who committed atrocities against Jews and minorities. Despite that, you still figured out how to find light in total darkness and love within hate. While spending your time at Auschwitz, you found ways to occupy yourself, to keep your mind on the future and not on the nightmares of the present. You were able to see past the barbed wire and envision a future away from the hell that you were experiencing.

Each night as you watched the new transports of prisoners arriving to the death camp, you would secretly hope that in the midst of the crowds of people you might recognize a family member, neighbor, or friend. You found that making friends and having your second cousin by your side kept your spirit alive as your body starved from hunger. The suffocating stench of death never left you as you grew older, but you refused to let it stop you from smelling the beautiful aromas of the Israeli markets you would frequent.

Your book ***The Power of Hatred, The Strength of Love***, showed me that loving is so much more difficult than hating. You showed me that it takes more strength to put aside differences and agreements and find common ground. You made me believe that this was possible even during challenging times like today. If you were capable of letting go of your feelings of hatred, I know that I can with utmost certainty. You did not allow the flames of Auschwitz to extinguish your soul, rather you used them to keep the embers of love alive in your heart.

My deepest admiration and appreciation,
Naomi C.

Level Three - Grades 9-12 - First Place Winner - 2022

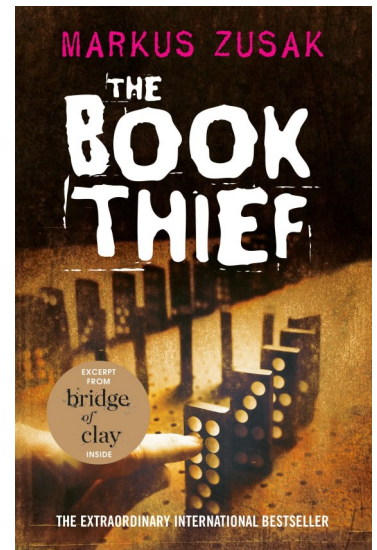
Loralee D.
Highland, Indiana

Dear Markus Zusak,

Before a good friend recommended your novel to me in junior high, I had never even heard the title. I can't remember her exact motivation for suggesting ***The Book Thief*** to me, but I doubt it went beyond the superficialities of being a "good book." Although we both loved to read and did so voraciously, your story connected to me on a far more personal level that kept it above the shifting seas of more forgettable literature which fills my brain. Key images and events clawed their way into my subconscious and still refuse to let go. The difference likely came down to starting the book by chance in the ideal emotional mindset, created by a recent and bitterly painful event: the death of my Great-Aunt Harriet.

Having had both of my grandmothers pass away before my first birthday, it was my wonderful great-aunt who reached out and took up that role for much of my early life. This was not something anyone ever asked her to do but an act of pure love and kindness. I remember the times she would babysit my younger brothers and me, teaching us how to kick our legs to make the swings move. I remember the ever-present plate of cookies and pitcher of lemonade on the kitchen table. I remember pretending to sleep on her small white couch as she and my parents exchanged funny stories about recent happenings. Even now, I keep her stained glass ornaments in my bedroom window. I was happy.

Meanwhile, I quickly learned to read so that I could dive into *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and dozens of *Magic Treehouse* stories: fantastical plots featuring bubbling characters that still hold a special place in my heart. Soon, I graduated into *Hatchet* and *The Lightning Thief* and was proud that my teachers felt that I could handle the more "mature themes." I began to unconsciously recognize the unspoken protection that surrounds important characters. Bad things can happen but not really bad things. Was I honestly supposed to think that Harry Potter was going to be killed in his first book when there are six more in the series? The same naturally had to be true for my life. If the important people in my life were to suddenly disappear from orbit, that would throw off my lovely universe. I don't believe that I trusted in



my own fundamental importance much more than the average child my age did, but it was a foundational part of my worldview nonetheless. Then one of my beloved planets suddenly disappeared.

At about the age of ten, my parents called my brothers and me together. My Great-Aunt Harriet had suffered a major stroke. She wasn't going to get better. She wasn't going to wake up again. Since there was no chance of Great-Aunt Harriet ever regaining consciousness, her children decided that the best choice was to take her off life support. Everything was coming too fast. For better or worse, my parents decided that my brothers and I were too young to go to the hospital to say good-bye. Nothing was fair. Why did I have to lose a person I loved so much? Why did it have to happen that way? If she had to die, why did it have to be split into two parts like a knife cutting into me a second time? By the time I began your book, about a year had passed, but the wound was still fresh. My faith, family, and friends did much to ease the sorrow; however, a quiet and continual mourning continued. Sometimes, in the time at night between turning out the lights and falling asleep, I would think of her. All I could do was cry hot tears until sleep finally came.

As I read the first few pages of ***The Book Thief***, it became clear that this novel was not like the ones I had read before. Confusion grew, then shock. Not only is the strange narrator the embodiment of Death, but he unceremoniously visits Liesel's younger brother. The character Death was desperately foreign to me; there had not even been a single warning in advance. As I journeyed farther into the story, the kind of story I was reading grew increasingly clear. There was never going to be a happy ending, and a lot of people were going to end up hurt or dead. This was the kind of book that I usually tried to avoid, a reminder of the hurt I had felt. Yet, with this one, it was different. It wasn't the bleak "reality" of the grimdark genre. Try as I might, I have never found another book like it, a story that dares to try carefully to balance between depicting life as a precious jewel and a dry leaf. The world of ***The Book Thief*** held both cruelty and hope in a way nearly identical to our own. Reading about both the good and the bad brought a kind of catharsis. This was a novel that truly contained the "mature themes" my teachers so often talked about.

As I reached the climax, Liesel's journey into the aftermath of the bombing, all I could feel was immense grief: grief for Liesel's parents, grief for Rudy, grief for Liesel herself, and in the background, grief for my Great-Aunt Harriet. Never had I witnessed character death of such a massive scale, characters that had been well-developed and meant something to both the narrative and the reader—and so realistically portrayed. Liesel doesn't emotionally shut down for the rest of her life or swear revenge on the ones who wronged her; despite her grief, she doesn't crumble. Despite all of the death and tragedy that falls into Liesel's life, she has to stay alive. Your novel offered me the most meaningful interpretation of this complex and somewhat abstract idea that I have as of yet seen, far more relevant than the Hallmark card advice that so often follows a death. This is even more true in a literary landscape chock full of poorly written books that too often just use the idea of death as an empty threat to keep bored readers engaged.

What I mean to say from all this is thank you. Thank you for being one of the first to show me that I was not alone in my pain of grief. Thank you for Liesel's resiliency. Thank you for your book.

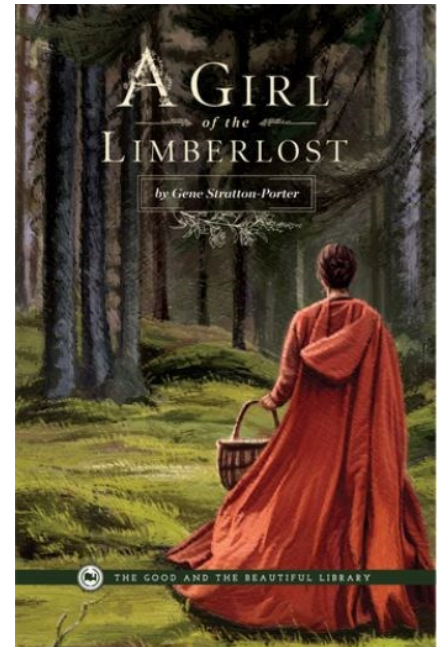
Sincerely,
Loralee D.

Indiana Author Letter Prize - 2022

BethAnn F.
Madison, Indiana

Dear Gene Stratton-Porter,

I grew up reading your books about nature and they have changed my life in so many ways. I greatly enjoyed **Laddie**, **Freckles**, and **A Girl of the Limberlost**. Thank you for preserving the beauty of nature and wildlife for future generations. Because of your writing, I can lose myself in a world of God's creations. Your books have taught me so many lessons. **Laddie** taught me how important family is in hard times, to believe in what I love, to be good no matter what other people think, that forgiveness is always the right answer, and that holding onto secrets and grudges will only lead to pain and hardship. **Freckles** taught me to fight for what is right, to push beyond my boundaries, to not judge people by their appearance but to make friends, that love is the greatest gift of life, to always be aware of my surroundings, and that nature is a gift. **A Girl of the Limberlost** taught me how important beauty is in my life, how to plan and achieve the future, that pain and sadness are beautiful because happiness and joy are more meaningful after hardship, to care about others no matter what, to be respectable and modest in all things, to be good at the things I love, and to be a person of hope in hard times.



Your characters have become more than just protagonists, they have become friends and family. Laddie learns a great lesson when he realizes how unforgiveness can destroy a family when the Pryors' son comes home. Pamela Pryor begs the Strantons to keep her brother's return a secret because her father might hurt him. When Mr. Pryor finds out about his son, he finally sees the

hardship he has brought to his family and greatly regrets the ways he has acted in the past. But, I can't even begin to explain how grateful I am to have a friend like Freckles. Because Freckles was neglected at a young age he understands what it feels like to not be loved, therefore he always tries to encourage and befriend everyone.

"Freckles never tired of studying the devotion of a fox mother to her babies. To him, whose early life had been so embittered by continual proof of neglect and cruelty in human parents toward their children, the love of these furred and feathered folk of the Limberlost was even more of a miracle than to the Bird Woman and the Angel."

Freckles never looks down on me. He is always there to encourage me. Elnora from **A Girl of the Limberlost** has become a faithful friend through hard times. She stands by me when everything feels like it is falling apart. She says, "To me, it seems the only pleasure in this world worth having is the joy we derive from living for those we love, and those we can help." Elnora has become a dear friend because she has experienced hardship but has found joy in other things and she teaches me how to do the same. Lastly, I can't forget about the Bird Woman. She lets me explore creation alongside her. She teaches me about birds, flowers, butterflies, and trees.

Gene Stratton-Porter, thank you so much for painting elaborate pictures of the creation you love. It makes me able to experience what you experienced when you were young. And I have gained so many lessons from my friendships with your characters. The world has changed a lot but because of your books, everyone can encounter the beauty of the Limberlost.

Gratefully yours,

BethAnn F.